# responding to students who Bite

## Key messages

* Follow the guidance issued to schools by the Department for school operations for remote and on-site teaching
* Biting others at school is a challenging behaviour.
* Biting may constitute [occupational violence and aggression](https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/occupational-violence-and-aggression-schools/policy). Refer to reporting requirements in [eduSafe](https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/reporting-and-managing-school-incidents-including-emergencies/policy).
* When a student bites another person, the priority is to ensure everyone’s safety, and support the student through the behavioural episode.
* Staff should respond to a student who bites as they typically would for any student exhibiting a challenging behaviour.

## definition of biting

Biting is tissue damage caused by the teeth of a human. A bite may or may not break the skin.

Young students, and some students with disability may bite themselves. This document does not address self-inflicted biting.

Staff should respond to a student who bites as they typically would for any student exhibiting a problem or challenging behaviour:

* Ensure everyone’s safety and implement appropriate hygiene control measures.
* For a student with a history of biting, follow the student’s Behaviour Support Plan (BSP) which outlines ways to support the student to not bite
* For a student that has begun biting, develop a BSP, to understand and respond to the behaviour. The BSP must address the function of the behaviour to be effective.

## understanding the function of biting

Understanding the function of the biting is to understand its purpose:

* Is it to escape something: reduced attention, academic demands?
* Is it to gain something: social attention, interruption of task demands, access to something the student can touch (e.g. an object)?
* Does it produce a positive bodily or emotional sensation for the student?

Understanding the function of the biting behaviour helps determine the appropriate response to the behaviour. Refer to Antecedent (A), behaviour (B), and consequence (C) data in [Functional behaviour assessment](https://app-policy-det-vic-gov-au-production.lagoon.vicsdp.amazee.io/pal/behaviour-students/guidance/7-functional-behaviour-assessment) for more information.

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|  | **Antecedent (A)**  What occurred before the behaviour? | **Behaviour (B)**  What did the student do? | **Consequence (C)**  How did you or others respond? What did the student do then? |
| Are there conditions, events or factors connected with when the behaviour happens?  Consider where and when the biting happens? Does it happen in a specific place, at a specific time, linked to a specific activity or person? | What happens immediately before the student bites another person?  What is the trigger for the behaviour?  Consider if there any setting events that might relate to when the behaviour happens?  Consider if there has been a recent change in the classroom set up, staff or students in class, access to an activity or object? | Describe the behaviour objectively, with facts.  Do not include personal feelings, interpretations, or assumptions about what the student was thinking or feeling. | How do staff typically respond to being bitten, or nearly bitten?  Is the behaviour being reinforced (encouraged) because staff engage with it or respond to it somehow? |
| Arrival in classroom each morning | Student asked to sit in circle and the teacher places their hand on the student’s shoulder as a prompt | Student bites teacher on the forearm | Teacher tells the student they can sit at their desk |

*Interpretation:* The student bites the teacher when given a non-preferred direction to sit in the circle. *Hypothesised function:* Escape (the student is permitted to sit elsewhere, thereby escaping the teacher’s request). *Possible immediate proactive strategy:* (1) Prompt the student to sit in circle using appropriate communication method and without physical prompt. Reinforce appropriately for sitting in circle. (2) If the student does not sit in circle, ask the student where they would like to sit. Reinforce choice appropriately. (3) Avoid physical contact with the student when giving an instruction. *Rationale for strategy:* Avoids possible injury to teacher by removing antecedent to student’s behaviour; maximises student cooperation.

## responding to biting

Responding to biting will include prevention and intervention strategies. These focus on making changes to prevent biting from happening. The strategies must target the purpose or function of the biting. Using your understanding of the biting, these strategies might include:

* If the function of the behaviour is to gain attention, encouraging appropriate behaviour by withholding social attention. For instance, staff ignore the biting and withhold social attention which has been identified as being a positive reinforcer for this particular student. When the student requests attention without biting or other type of challenging behaviour, the teacher provides explicit acknowledge of the student using expected behaviour and reinforces this appropriately.
* Changing the student’s activities to include a [story-based intervention](https://starautismsupport.com/classroom-tools?rcpid=933) with self-modelling. This activity concentrates the student’s attention on appropriate replacement behaviours. The activity might include showing the visual reactions to the student’s biting to demonstrate its impact on others, and a previously identified reinforcer such as verbal praise given when the student participates in the activity, such as sitting in the circle when prompted to by staff.
* Disrupting the student’s behaviour pattern in advance of a behavioural incident. This requires careful monitoring of the student and understanding their patterns of behaviour.
* Teaching the student replacement behaviours for biting. That is, teaching the student how to escape an activity or gain attention in more acceptable ways such as saying no or raising an arm to summon staff. The student must be positively reinforced, for example, given specific verbal praise, for using the replacement behaviour for biting.

## risk prevention in specialist schools

The [Health, Safety and Wellbeing Policy](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/hrweb/safetyhw/Pages/hswpolicy.aspx) recognises that every employee has the right to workplace health and safety, and that employee health, safety and wellbeing is essential for achieving excellent educational and work performance outcomes.

When a student bites, the immediate focus should be on making sure that everyone is safe and supporting the student through the behavioural episode whilst making sure that nothing is done to accidently reinforce their behaviour.

Specialist schools must control, as much as possible, [the risks to employees from student challenging behaviour](https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/resources/guide-challenging-behaviour-risk-prevention-specialist-schools).

**PRACTICAL TIPS FOR WORKING WITH STUDENTS WHO REGULARLY BITE**

* Allocate back-up staff who could make themselves available to temporarily support the student while another staff member attends to their injury.
* Document and communicate handover procedures to all staff working with the student. Include a checklist of steps to follow before and after working with the student.
* Collect [ABC data](https://app-policy-det-vic-gov-au-production.lagoon.vicsdp.amazee.io/pal/behaviour-students/resources) by one or more staff members who frequently work or interact with the student. Data informed decisions are necessary to develop effective strategies.
* Ensure the BSP is being used accurately by staff by regularly observing if staff are implementing the plan as it is written and providing feedback and coaching as necessary.
* Ensure resources needed to support the student, and keep staff safe, are readily available when needed. This might include easy access to first aid supplies.
* Offer support to staff impacted by the student’s behaviour. Refer to [Employee Health, Safety and Wellbeing Services](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/hrweb/safetyhw/Pages/employeeservices.aspx?utm_source=email+marketing+Mailigen&utm_campaign=Direct+Send+%E2%80%93+Emergency&utm_medium=emailhttps://www.education.vic.gov.au/hrweb/safetyhw/Pages/employeeservices.aspx?utm_source=email+marketing+Mailigen&utm_campaign=Direct+Send+%E2%80%93+Emergency&utm_medium=email) for more information.
* Consider whether staff require additional training in data collection and interpretation, devising an intervention etc.
* Ensure there is a review process for incidents that considers the data, and whether the identified function of the behaviour continues to be accurate, the reinforcer continues to be effective and strategies are being used by staff in line with the BSP.

**what to do if you have been bitten**

Staff should take the following steps immediately:

* Handover the student to another staff member for support
* Refer to [First Aid and Infection Control](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/hrweb/safetyhw/Pages/firstaidohsms.aspx)
* Refer to the [Occupational Violence and Aggression in Schools Post Incident Checklist](https://nginx-php-content-policy-det-vic-gov-au-production.lagoon.vicsdp.amazee.io/sites/default/files/2020-07/Occupational-Violence-post-incident-checklist.pdf)